

Telling tales on Europa

Michael Squire

*Look, why do you think we remember
Leda's swan-petting, or Io's life as a cow,
Or poor virgin Europa whisked off overseas, clutching
That so-called bull by the – horn?*

Through poems, of course.

Ovid, *Amores* 1.3.21–24

(adapted from translation by Peter Green)

According to Ovid, whose *Amores* or *Love affairs* were written in the late first century B.C., we remember the events and figures of the mythical past because of what we read in poems. Whether it be Leda, Io, Europa, or indeed any of the other women whom Jupiter seduced and raped, every one of them owes that celebrity status to the songs that were sung about her. Ovid's insistence that it is through poetry that we remember stories was a way of scoring with his latest woman. If only the female addressee of his poem would give in to his advances as Leda had to those of Jupiter, she too would be famous. But it was also a way of scoring over the rival claim of pictures: for Ovid, as for countless other writers, it is through poems, not pictures, that we know what we know.

Poets would suggest as much, of course. But the rich remains of Roman wall-paintings, sculptures, and mosaics suggest that pictures could likewise tell stories about, and reflect upon, the world of myth. By concentrating on three images dealing with the story of Europa, we'll explore the sorts of challenges that pictures pose to a poem. How might pictures hope to rival, outstrip, or at least answer back to, the authority of a text?

Titillating with Titian

Ovid came to treat the story of Europa in a poem of his own – the *Metamorphoses*, a fifteen-book epic centred on the theme of transformation (2.833–875). Europa, Ovid recounts, was a Phoenician princess whose beauty caught the eye of Jupiter. Donning the guise of a handsome white bull, the god sauntered along the beach where Europa and her handmaidens were playing. Although initially cautious, little by little Europa plucked up the courage to draw near, stroke the bull, feed him the flowers that she had been gathering. Finding him so (apparently) docile, she slowly proceeds to stroke his belly, entwine garlands around his horns, even mount his back. Still carrying his burden, the Jupiter-bull thereupon trots calmly down to the shore, paddles in its shallow waters – then, suddenly, charges off over the open ocean. 'Carried away and terrified', Ovid continues, 'Europa looks back at the receding shore; her right hand holds the bull's horn, her left rests on his back, and her trembling garments billow in the wind' (2.873–875). (Ovid was less interested in the story's outcome, but Europa was said to have landed in Crete from where her descendants peopled 'Europe'.)

One Renaissance attempt to take up the story as narrated by Ovid is Titian's *Rape of Europa*, a painting completed in c.1562 and sent to King Philip II of Spain. Titian was well acquainted with the *Metamorphoses*, albeit primarily in translation. By associating the scene with Ovid's account, Titian could hope to elevate the essentially pornographic undertones of the composition and to clothe its sexual suggestiveness under a veil of Classical decency (notice, for example, Europa's revealing drapery, bare breast, and open legs). If his viewers would only read his painting in Ovidian terms, they would understand its daring

eroticism as an essential part of its 'high artistic' (that is to say, 'high literary') merit.

But how might an artist hope to capture in a single painting a story which Ovid tells over some forty or so lines? Titian immediately draws our attention to Europa, whose body is aligned with the painting's diagonal, and whose colour immediately singles her out from the darker hues that surround her. Then we notice the cupids to her left, symbolizing Jupiter's desire, again arranged to form a triangle. Finally, on the distant shore, we see the handmaidens whom Europa has left behind: by including them, Titian skilfully alludes to the earlier moment in the story, when Europa and her handmaidens played on the beach, blissfully unaware of the drama that would follow.

What, though, makes this picture specifically 'Ovidian'? A number of pictorial details certainly correspond with the story as recounted by Ovid: note, for example, the colour of the bull, the wreath of flowers around its horns, and how Europa's hand (albeit her left, not right) grasps one of them. It is more difficult to explain other elements of the picture in terms of Ovid's account. Strictly speaking, Europa's right hand shouldn't hold any drapery, but should instead 'rest on the bull's back'. And what about these three cupids (one on a rather monstrous-looking dolphin)? Or the foreboding storm brewing over the Ocean? Or the mountains in the distance? The colour of the sea, drapery and scarf...? None of *these* are mentioned in Ovid's account. But each helps to summon up its atmosphere – to show what the Ovidian description might actually *look* like.

For Philip II, and every other well-read viewer who looked at this painting in the seventeenth century, it, and indeed any other depiction of the 'Rape of Europa', couldn't but bring to mind the Ovidian telling of the story – its tone, mood, and association with the *Metamorphoses* as a whole (and all that meant). At the same time, however, no matter how strictly an artist might try to stick to this account, the painting couldn't but fail to deviate from, elaborate, and, in so doing, challenge, the authority of the text.

Telling tales on pictures, and pictures on tales

It is harder to determine the role Ovid played in ancient interpretations of the many Roman images representing Europa. While modern Classical scholars, like the well-to-do Renaissance viewers of Titian's painting, tend instinctively to view such images through text-tinted spectacles, we just don't know how large Ovid (or any other poet) loomed in ancient understandings of the myth. And since, as we have seen, correspondence between the details of an image and the particulars of a text can't necessarily prove or disprove interaction between picture and poem, it is still more difficult to establish whether ancient artists knew their Ovid; or, again, to work out whether they could have known the story of Europa *except* through the lens of Ovid's account.

An early-third-century mosaic from the Phoenician town of Byblos (near Beirut in the Lebanon) provides a case in point. The mosaic shares a number of formal similarities with Titian's painting: Europa's side-saddle position, for instance, her billowing scarf, and the way in which the bull's gaze meets our own (inviting us to identify with Jupiter, and so to lust after the pretty little thing on his back who teasingly looks away from us). The Roman viewer who was acquainted with Ovid's telling of the story, however, might have made sense of this mosaic in rather

different ways from one who was not. For him, the picture could have raised potentially unsettling questions about Europa's feelings about this rape. Whatever Ovid says about her passive naivety, Europa here seems very much in control of the situation: she sits calm and collected, her legs crossed, more in the manner of someone reclining on a dining-couch than the victim of a violent abduction.

For another viewer, without that textual point of reference, the primary significance of the image might instead have been its very location in Phoenicia ('remember, you "European" Romans, you descend from us!'), or its appropriation of the billowing scarf motif from depictions of sea nymphs riding dolphins ('were you led into mistaking Europa for a nymph, the Jupiter-bull for her dolphin?'). Some have even seen in the whiteness of Europa's dress, the crescent horns of the bull, and the reins in his mouth, an allusion to the Phoenician moon goddess Astarte (a fusion attested in other ancient texts and images). If so, the image, laid out in the dining-room of a private house, playfully catered to Roman and native Phoenician viewers alike.

A lot of hot air?

A second Roman mosaic, this time from the other corner of the Roman Empire – Lullingstone in Kent – resembles the Byblos image in a number of ways. Dated only a century or so later, and much criticised for its 'provincial' style, the Lullingstone mosaic similarly appeared in a Roman dining room, where a horseshoe-shaped couch probably once surrounded it. Here, however, a short epigram above the image of Europa brought the playoff between art and text to the foreground:

*Invida si ta(uri) uidisset Iuno natatus
Iustius Aeolias isset ad usque domos.*

*If Juno in her jealousy had seen the swimming bull
More justly would she have gone to Aeolus' halls.*

The epigram is written in the same metre as Ovid's *Amores*, and in a style that makes us think of Ovid. But it is not to the *Metamorphoses* that the poem refers, but rather to the *Aeneid*, written by Ovid's contemporary, Virgil, the 'poet laureate' of Augustan Rome. In Book 1 of the *Aeneid* Juno, Jupiter's ever-slighted wife, ventures to visit Aeolus, the King of the Winds, persuading him to unleash these winds, whip up a storm, and to shipwreck Aeneas and his crew (see David Hodgkinson's piece in this issue). If Juno had only seen how that two-timing husband of hers had carried on with Europa, asks the inscription, with what greater cause would she have asked Aeolus to disturb the sea!

The epigram's reference to Virgil, and the learning required to understand it, certainly served to elevate the picture's subject. Like Titian's painting, the Lullingstone mosaic delights in showing Europa's spread legs, bare breasts, and body covered in, and exposed by, her drapery. But just as we saw Titian (barely) dress his erotic interest in the story by nodding to the *Metamorphoses*, the owner of this mosaic clothed his appreciation of this equally titillating picture with a nod to the *Aeneid*. At the same time, the learned flamboyance of the inscription proudly displays the education and learning of the villa's owner. It might even have challenged his guests to rival his learning – to come up with alternative captions for the picture during the course of dinner.

But what about the claim with which we began – that poetry reigns supreme over painting, texts over images, words over pictures? On first impressions, the combination of mosaic and inscription at Lullingstone might seem to suggest just that – the weakness of pictures, their inability to rival the authority of a text, their inevitable dependence on words. But the scenario also surely supports the opposite conclusion. While the epigram squarely attributes sole responsibility for this affair to Jupiter ('the swimming bull'), the mosaic suggests that Europa, shown

composed and provocatively positioned, was far from innocent in the affair, while the poor old bull is molested even by the mischievous cupid which pulls his tail. If the inscription leads us to the *Aeneid*, Rome's civic poem *par excellence*, the mosaic subversively directs our attention to the less lofty world of Olympian shenanigans and extra-marital sex. The combining of image and epigram at Lullingstone sparks off all sorts of new stories, myths, and narratives.

The Lullingstone mosaic, then, recalls a poem about the mythical past only to undermine its authority and finesse, poking fun at its serious content. How here are we to remember, and make sense of, the rape of Europa? Through pictures, of course.

To find out more about Lullingstone, and details about how to see the Europa mosaic in its original context, go to the English Heritage website at <http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/server/show/conProperty.195>.

Michael Squire is a research student at Cambridge. He is also co-author with Nigel Spivey of Panorama of the Classical World published by Thames and Hudson.